

# Marxism and film criticism: the current situation (1977)

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## Preface

This essay was written partly by request from people working in and around *The Minnesota Review*, an established literary journal, moving leftward. Chuck had been in discussions with some folks wondering if the Popular Culture Association might be a place where a wider range of politics and cultural issues could be presented. *New German Critique* was getting underway, but had a fairly defined scope of Central European studies. The Modern Language Association was in one way broad and had been revived by some progressive and radical efforts, but it definitely remained bound by deep-seeded department level resistance to popular culture and visual media. Julia had been involved with the pioneering feminist journal, *Women & Film*, and both of us had founded *Jump Cut* along with John Hess in 1974. We were asked to address what the field of film studies, clearly emerging and containing some very exciting new work, and increasingly getting a foothold in Marxist cultural analysis, could contribute to a vigorous cultural and aesthetic analysis.

We wrote it as a basic introduction, with an eye to both left political thinkers in the new post-Vietnam War era, and to people in the broad area of cultural studies, which we saw as covering both the British “Birmingham School” and the U.S. American Studies and intellectual journalism on current and emerging trends. We wanted to convey our own enthusiasm and the excitement of working on something new and original, unbound by static and conventional thought.

# Marxism and film criticism: the current situation (1977)

Film criticism is notoriously uneven. Marxist film criticism is no exception. In part the erratic development of critical film study by both Marxists and non-Marxists can be explained by a number of unique problems. First, there are many types and forms of and uses for film—from technical and education shorts to feature fictional entertainments, from documentaries to avant-garde experiments—as a result, "film" describes a medium, not a unitary object of study; it is closer to "book" than to "literature." Second, in contrast to writing or painting, filmmaking is almost always an expensive, collaborative effort—more like theatrical performance than dramatic text. Thereby film criticism demands an economic and sociological analysis of production and reception as well as a close study of the work, director, genre and period. The object of study itself is elusive: film "texts" are altered physically by bad projection, fading color dyes, erratic repairs, and many other difficulties. Individually variant texts are a given. This problem is compounded when a 35 millimeter film is available for study only in the small image size of a 16 millimeter print. In addition, ordinary projection means a limited way of looking at film: until recently very few have been able to work with the expensive editing table facilities crucial for close study.

Film is still so new that there are arguments on such fundamental questions as what film is. For example, the basic aim of Christian Metz's widely discussed and debated book, *Language and Cinema*, is to define cinema and film. In addition, the establishment of a canon for film scholars and critics is itself problematic in a field where the division of mass and high culture is questionable, if not invalid (which is Chaplin?). And the very diversity of film as a medium leaves it open to an inherently interdisciplinary approach since its specialists come from sociology, art history, literature, mass communications, cultural history, technical filmmaking, etc.

However, all these "problems" present an immense advantage for Marxists. Relative to the other arts, film provides an open field with no significant tradition to battle, but rather an immense range of texts and approaches and an uncertain canon. Film has an inherently collective mode of production and a relatively close relation to the economic base and to other parts of the social superstructure. It is open to interdisciplinary approaches, and the Marxist critic can communicate with a fairly wide range of readers without recourse to the academic stylistics of the established disciplines.

Marxist film criticism has one great strength: the body of early Soviet films. Both experimental and Marxist, these films give the critic a constant reference point. But such uneven Marxist film criticism as there is has tended to focus on the realist tradition in film as the norm without noticing the ideological biases inherent in realism. (It is only in the late 60's that film's version of Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács' debate over realism began in earnest.) The attraction to realism is partially due to the fact that politically progressive filmmakers, such as those from the French Popular Front, Joris Ivens, the British documentarists, and the Italian neorealists, took as a given that a certain kind of "realist" cinematic narrative and visual continuity was most

apt for making films about (and sometimes for) the proletariat. Most seriously, Marxists have overlooked the tradition of agit-prop films—those films made to directly contribute to a political struggle. To some extent this neglect can be attributed to the highly topical nature of such films, but the lessons for present radical criticism and film making are frequently missed.

At present, Marxist film criticism stands at a particularly important point in relation to Marxist aesthetics and cultural theory. Traditionally, Marxism has tended to either ignore mass art such as film, or to condemn it out of hand for not matching European conceptions of high culture. However, this neglect has also allowed recent Marxist film criticism to rapidly assimilate post-Leninist trends: for example, Walter Benjamin's concept of the industrial production of culture, Bertolt Brecht's critique of bourgeois and Soviet realism, and Antonio Gramsci's analysis of ideological hegemony.

The current renaissance of Marxist film criticism began in France. The early and middle 60s saw an intellectual flourishing of a revived Marxism, along with structuralism, semiology, and psychoanalysis. In that ambiance, the general strike of May-June 68 caused certain key filmmakers and critics to define themselves and their work as specifically Marxist. *Positif*, the lone left film magazine of the 50s and 60s, was joined by the prestigious *Cahiers du cinéma* when the latter's editorial board went left. Both were outflanked on the left by a new publication, *Cinéthique*, which followed a French Maoist line. *Cinéthique* criticized bourgeois film form, analyzed the economics of the French film industry and state and institutional controls over film, and explained and applied Louis Althusser's Marxist analysis of ideology to film. In 1972 *Cahiers* followed *Cinéthique*'s Maoist example. Key in this entire shift was the example of Jean-Luc Godard, and his partner during the period, Jean-Pierre Gorin. They produced a series of militant 16 millimeter films which were not only Marxist in content, but examples of the critics' call for a specifically political "deconstruction" of narrative forms, especially melodrama. One aspect of both Godard and Gorin's films and the film criticism of that period was to apply a Brechtian type of critique to militant films which depended on realism and identification, now seen as part of bourgeois film form.

The complex, intense explosion of Marxist film criticism seems obtuse to many not familiar with the French intellectual scene, where a knowledge of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Christian Metz, as well as a working acquaintance with Marxism is taken for granted. While these thinkers are not Marxists, their work is in many ways materialist and compatible with Marxism. Barthes, for example, has devoted his career to an examination of bourgeois cultural ideology. The context of this criticism is also political and includes a rejection of the two previously dominant left influences, the French Communist Party "humanist" position and Sartre's engagé criticism, and an acceptance of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as it could be applied to France. Critics and filmmakers also have fought the strict, direct government control of all the media in France. For example, some films

dealing with Algeria and all the militant films of the '68 events are still unlicensed.

As a result, French criticism seems to deal with a strange canon of films and offers critical perspectives which are on the correct track, but crude or limited. The influential *Cahiers* "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" essay and explication of bourgeois ideology in John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (translated in *Screen* (UK) Spring 71, Summer 71, Spring 72 and Autumn 72, respectively) are suggestive but hardly models. Ground-breaking materialist analyses of the ideology of deep focus cinematography by Jean-Patrick Lebel, Jean-Louis Comolli, and *Cinéthique* followed a French interest in examining ideology at the "point of production of meaning"—again, a fruitful, but also limited, idea.

Some French secondary school film books and other film publications, especially those appealing to the numerous cineclubs, have taken up Marxist and semiological concepts: e.g., *Image et son*, *Cinéma 70* (71, 72, etc), *Ecran 70...*, and *Jeune cinéma*. One also finds the popular press and mainstream arts and letters publications regularly writing on film and politics. Even the French Communist Party's staid *La Nouvelle critique*, which has held onto traditional realist perspectives in the arts, began in 1972 to deal with semiology with Michel Marie's long review of Metz's *Language and Cinema* and a three-critic review of Godard and Gorin's feature, *Tout va bien*.

In Anglo-American film criticism, reception of the French activities has been uneven. Facing the hostility of the older establishment's impressionism and historicism and the younger establishment's auteurism (an idealist exaltation of the director as singular creator), those outside of the orthodoxy have tended to split in three directions: taking over semiology as a new formalism, rejecting it as bizarre obscurantism, or uneasily combining semiology and Marxism. In the early 70s, *Screen*, under the editorship of Sam Rohdie, moved away from British establishment criticism to introduce into English criticism articles on semiotics, the *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* perspectives, Russian Formalism, and Brecht. It provided translations, commentaries, and some examples of applied criticism, in a characteristically eclectic mix. For the past two years, Ben Brewster, English translator of Althusser, held editorship, but editorial interest has shifted to the new French psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan rather than dialectical materialism. However Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, translator of Gramsci, has just assumed the editorship and a new direction may be forthcoming.

*Afterimage*, an infrequent but important British publication, has reflected an alliance of Marxism and the avant-garde. Developing out of their interest in popular and mass culture, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (U. of Birmingham), has applied Marxist cultural theory—both British and French—to a close study of contemporary British working class culture and to British film. The group is especially notable for its range, interest in ideology, and recognition of the critiques of the feminist movement.

The development of Marxist film criticism in the United States is linked to the

struggles of the 60s and 70s, and the radical critiques of dominant culture which emerged from the Movement (especially from blacks and Third World people, women, gays, and the counterculture), and the emergence of a new, primarily documentary, agit-prop strain of filmmaking with the New Leftish Newsreel network. The greatest strength of U.S. Marxist film criticism is its close relationship to specific political efforts and its breadth, especially in understanding imperialism, racism, and sexism. Three publications, more accurately described as "radical" or "left" than Marxist, though all print explicitly Marxist material, are developing new critiques of film. *Cinéaste*, with a general stand against "academic" film criticism—i.e., against the French and Godard—has tended to emphasize documentary and Third World films. *Women and Film* has now ceased publication, but began with a strong feminist critique of the image of women in male Hollywood films, and then increasingly concentrated on commercial and independent—particularly feminist—women filmmakers. *Jump Cut*'s orientation has been towards an ideological critique of Hollywood and an interest in international developments in film theory, both semiology and Marxism.

Marxist film criticism occupies a peculiar, and we think crucial, place in the present development of the Marxist critique of culture. Because of the self-evident poverty of orthodox bourgeois film criticism, and the relative neglect of film by traditional Marxist aesthetics, at the present moment Marxist film criticism offers the possibility of transcending the former and advancing the latter. Marxist critics may emphasize or concentrate on one area of the total film process—the film itself as an object of study in a context; the makers and making; the audience's understanding of film; production and distribution; mediations on the preceding such as technical components, mode of presentation, criticism, the historical situation out of which the film object emerges and in which it is received; and above all the relation of the whole process to society, both in an historical context and with a view to change—but their work is among the most exciting and creative being done in Marxist cultural and aesthetic studies. An art form and medium unknown to Marx and Engels, film shares in the current reestablishment of a mature Marxist aesthetic and inherently goes beyond that into the deeper questions of Marxist social and political theory and practice.

## Afterward: 2014

Looking back, 37 years later, it's worth remarking that this essay appeared on the cusp of a new wave of intellectual publication with the appearance of *Camera Obscura*, *CinéAction*, *CinéTracts*, *Tabloid*, *New German Critique*, *Frameworks*, *Social Text*, and other new publications, and a push for more conventional journals to account for radical political analysis. In some ways our unabashed willingness to speak as Marxists in *Jump Cut* separated us from people who for reasons of career-building or closet clinging wouldn't utter the M word, but tried to go with coded euphemisms such as "historical materialism." In any case there was a springtime flush of fresh and innovative

work. And the inevitable pushback as political scaredy-cats matched their theory to the wind blowing through the Reagan and Thatcher years by suddenly fretting about “grand narratives” and how it was just not right to try to have a long-take overview of society but it was time to stay by the hearth and embroider post-structural formalisms.

But the fuller story of Marxism and film analysis would take much more space than we have here. Obviously the end of the Mao era and the Soviet state system changed the game again as Marxism could be used as a form of analysis that turned out to be particularly adept at understanding global neoliberalism. As the translation and rediscovery of a rich history of radical political cultural analysis and creative work proceeded in the 1980s, 90s, and Millennium, a fuller and more diverse cultural Marxism could be imagined. Within progressive media studies the formerly hostile branches of critical cultural analysis and economic and institutional critique were increasingly able to co-exist and even merge in the best new work.

In the subsequent years we saw Marxism as a central concern in our own projects, creative and critical, but one that was endlessly renewed and enriched by the social practice and political activism around labor, community, race, sex, gender, and nation. In our vision, *Jump Cut* has been a place to invite a diverse set of voices, to stimulate an ongoing conversation to building an effective alternative.

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